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The Approach To History

By LOGAN ESAREY

The hard plain highway to mathematics is by the multiplication table. A great deal of time has been wasted by teachers in vain attempts to find an easier road for children but sooner or later all such teachers have, together with their classes, been lost in the byways. They have been compelled to return to the hard straight, plain road. The every day mathematics to every-day children is addition, subtraction, multiplication and division and these processes must be learned. It can neither be avoided nor delayed.

The fundamental ideas of geography are land, water, climate, distance, direction, people and the products of all these singly and in conjunction. These lie all about us in our immediate presence. Teachers of geography have finally come to recognize that the only approach to their subject is through the immediate neighborhood to the world at large.

Teachers of biology have long ago quit requiring primary pupils to commit to memory the so-called laws of life and have begun by learning the concrete facts of life in the neighborhood. The plants, birds, insects, animals and their habits are the text books.

Language teachers have ceased to teach, as introductory language work, the abstract rules of grammar and composition and are using the ordinary speech of ordinary folks as used in their ordinary experiences.

In spite of the plain warnings from these sources history teachers in large numbers still cling to the old idea of beginning history teaching at and with the beginning of history. It would seem there is as much reason for beginning zoology with the first animal life on earth; botany, with the first plant life; or language, with the first efforts of the cave man to communicate his mind to others.

History deals with man in his struggles for freedom from the restraining circumstances of his environment. In this struggle many organizations or institutions have been developed. It is a mistake to assume that social life or institutions

were simpler in the beginning of history. The whole tendency of civilization is to simplify human life and its institutions, just as law and order are simpler than chance and violence. And even if early life were simpler the difficulty in procuring evidences of and the changed environment around early society would make it impracticable to begin history there. Only the most highly trained imaginations can realize the conditions of society in the remote ages. And if this were not reason enough the fact is that the early institutions were so entirely different from ours at present that a thorough knowledge of them would be of no more advantage to a citizen than a knowledge of the surgery of ancient Egypt would be in a modern clinic.

In Indiana we have not yet entirely discarded the culture epoch theory in our primary history. For years our children struggled with the imaginary problems of Kablu as he labored to develop Aryan institutions under the shadows of the Altai and Hindu Kush mountains; or attended imaginary popular assemblies with Wolf the Saxon in the swamps and shades of north Germany. For years all the preparation for citizenship in Indiana obtained in the primary schools of the state was obtained from the puerile stories of the Ten Boys or Ten Little Sisters. These books might, at least, have been written so as to acquaint the children with the language of history, but even this was neglected.

A variation of this culture epoch program consists in arranging the present people of the earth in a series according to their development in civilization and making the history course accordingly. Thus the first grade would begin with life in Aryan and Egyptian times, tent dwellers, shepherds, nomads, passing to the Phoenicians, Hottentots and Indians, thence in the middle or grammar grades to Medieval history and in the seventh and eighth grades to modern civilization. The redeeming feature of this scheme, it is said, is that the child is always studying that period of civilization which corresponds to his own nature.

Still another variation of this widespread culture epoch theory in history teaching is the dramatic or literary plan. These teachers assume that history is an epic or drama. Thus to the young child history becomes a fable or fairy story; to

the more advanced it becomes a heroic legend, or saga, to the still more advanced, an epic; to the highest grades it is drama, the drama of life. All this is very beautiful and is based on that favorite "bed-rock principle of pedagogy", natural interest. The only serious objection to it is it has no history in it. Other objections need hardly be considered. If a citizen's duties consisted principally in attending movies, theatres or opera this would be ideal preparation.

The culture-epoch theory of education it may be stated, in conclusion, rests on two assumptions. First, there is a uniform progress in civilization common to all people. Second this progress is from the simple to the complex. Both assumptions are unsupported by historical evidence and if they were as certain as the theory of gravitation two far more important pedagogical principles would be violated by the culture-epoch program. First, no conclusion of history should be presented to a class without its supporting evidence. There is no supporting evidence for the culture-epoch theory. Second, education in general proceeds from the known to the related unknown. History is read and understood, if it is understood, through the "here" and the "now".

A second approach to history, almost as widespread as the culture-epoch and equally vicious, is the heroic. This theory of history is upheld by Rousseau, Carlyle and Emerson among others. Briefly stated it assumes that history is the biography of heroes. Great forward movements are the socialization of the thoughts of a single man and are established by the efforts of some far-seeing individual. The masses are to institutions only what brick and mortar are to a building—mere unthinking passive material. The idea permeates and vitiates history writing as well as history teaching.

We have the history of England in *Heroes of English History*; of America, in *Heroes of American History*; of Germany in *Heroes of German History* and so of Greece, Rome, Spain, Jewry and the world. Three principal considerations support this theory.

First is the ethical. The biographies are chosen for their moral content. It is the intention that the mind and conduct of the pupils shall be moulded by the thoughts and conduct of the hero studied. Here begin insuperable difficulties. No

hero fills the bill exactly. The hard choice must be met of teaching doubtful morals or of falsifying history. No hesitation has been shown to choose the latter as the lesser of the two evils. Beginning with Plutarch a long list of historians have idealized and moralized biography until it is rare indeed to find a sound biography. They have given us expurgated heroes from Adam to Roosevelt. The stuff has been washed out, softened, sweetened, and sugar-coated till red-blooded children even have turned away in disgust. On such a foundation no teacher can hope to build, later, an appreciation or understanding of history. Rousseau, who first insisted on biography as an approach to history, demanded for Emile a truthful biography. We need not stop here to inquire how valuable such teaching is for ethics. We need only note that these biographies are not written from sound evidence and hence can have no value for history.

A second argument for the hero in history is that he is an epitome of his times. Some biographies do come up to this definition—such as Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, Hay and Nicolay's *Life of Lincoln*, or Thayer's *Life of Cavour*, but there is no danger of these becoming texts in primary history. Such voluminous biographies are necessary to show the tremendous influences of the times on the man. To teach that the times have no influence on the man is to falsify history and no method which does not entirely recognize the integrity of its subject matter can be valid. In other words scholarship is a condition of both teacher and teaching which cannot be violated. To say that the American Revolution is but a biography of Washington, or of Washington, Franklin, Henry and any number of their companions is to neglect the evidence of history. Napoleon and Cromwell were successful so long only as they were supported by the people. Washington and Lincoln were more successful because they went no farther than the public opinion of their times would support. In other words every leader, except perhaps a few military captains, is to be tried by a jury of his peers rather than worshiped by a choir of servants. The method moreover is dangerous in a democracy. It leads to a belief in the mythical super-man of which we have entirely too much in the United States at present. A nation of people which accepts its

leaders' statements without the proof to support them is worthy of a despot and will soon have him. The chief secondary aim of history, the training of independent, self-reliant judgment, is not only neglected by hero history but is violated. Quite recently such heroes as John Jacob Astor, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller and Carnegie have been set up as models of thrift in Indiana. This is hero-worship gone mad and if it were not so dangerous would be ridiculous. The German school children were fed for generations on hero stories until a distorted patriotism led them to view their leaders and German Culture with veneration if not worship. The late disaster in Europe is traceable directly to vicious historians and history teaching. It is hardly necessary to point out that German methods have obtained a powerful foothold in our schools.

The third argument for the hero or biographical approach is that biography is simpler than history and therefore more easily understood. The last part of this statement goes back for its justification to the old and pervasive fundamental of Rousseauistic pedagogy that children should be taught what they prefer or what they like. This is said to be the natural method. In spite of much that is said to the contrary it seems best to preserve the school for work. Work does not follow lines of least resistance. It goes over and through obstacles rather than around them. History requires work just as arithmetic, grammar, or spelling. It takes mental exertion to comprehend a problem in arithmetic, a rule of grammar or the Battle of Bunker Hill. No amount of play, which follows lines of inclination or least resistance, will ever acquire this or any other knowledge worth while. There is no accomplishment to the children or promise to the teacher in this recreation pedagogy.

The claim of simplicity is a valid claim if true. It is worth while to approach any problem in teaching at its simplest point. Admitting this however is not admitting the proposition that an individual is more easily understood than an event or even an institution. Biography is exactly the storm center of history. Cause and effect are large factors in events. Few children of the age of twelve but will follow step by step from evidence to event and from event to event up to the outbreak of the Revolution, but how many will

understand why the wealthy, aristocratic Washington should have been its leader? One can understand Samuel Adams or John Hancock, whose business was interfered with, more easily. One can appreciate why the theoretical, impulsive young Jefferson should sit on the committee that wrote the Declaration but how about the aged, prosperous, happy, respected, practical, prudent, Franklin? A more plausible reason for the biography seems to be that the hero furnishes a thread or unity to the action hard to attain otherwise. A human being is certainly more concrete and comprehensible than an abstract idea but to substitute Washington for patriotism, David for religion or Lincoln for justice is of doubtful efficacy and may lead to a reaction or a backslide later in life which will more than undo all that has been accomplished.

Still another large number of teachers use children's histories. Some of the texts were extremely simplified by being written in words of one syllable. The game is mere byplay. A thought cannot be simplified any more than a proposition in Euclid by being stated in simple language. Every writer of history, deserving the name, tells his story in the simplest, clearest manner. No two authors write with equal force and clearness. The text which excels in these qualities, both being equally trustworthy, is of course the best; but the child-language text is a farce.

One of the chief purposes in primary history is to acquaint children with the language of history, in fact when this acquaintance is complete the work of primary history is complete.

We may then dismiss the idea of adulterating or diluting history to make it easier for the earlier grades. Some events of the Revolution may be singled out and taught because they lead immediately to concrete results, but it is not necessary to use in the teaching anything but the authentic evidence of history; it is not necessary to teach anything which later will be found useless or have to be repudiated. The Boston Tea Party is a simple event, easily led up to and easily understood; but to connect that with the Vigilantes in San Francisco eighty years later is far more difficult. There is no lack of such concrete material in history, entirely authentic which when

learned will never have to be repudiated as a childish story learned in the grades.

Just here, however, is the grave error in most history teaching and the beginning of the downfall of most history students. How many teachers can picture in their minds the scene in old Boston on the night of December 16, 1773? To the ordinary sixth grade pupil in Indiana practically every element in the picture is strange. Nor is there any means at hand by which the teacher can make it real—the old city, the streets, the costumes, the ship, the wharf. Come to think about it, how much preparation would be required to teach so simple an event? Evidently the approach to history must begin nearer home and nearer now.

Perhaps some member of the class—and this might be done in any of the early grammar grades—has attended a woman's club, some boy has had personal experience of a farmers' meeting or a political meeting; another may know about the nearest church, a brick yard, a tobacco field, a cotton field, a factory, a political convention, a camp-meeting, a hospital or one of the hundreds of events, customs, associations, businesses, buildings, offices or institutions that make up the neighborhood society. If all this is learned in a year good progress will have been made.

The next step involves a considerable power of imagination and accordingly as it is well done will the capacity and appreciation for history be developed. From the immediate society of the neighborhood the second step should take the class to events which they cannot observe, either remote in time or place, or both. The less remote usually the easier will be the problem. Society in Indiana at the time of the Civil war furnishes an excellent field for this training. It should be kept in mind that the principal purpose is to learn how to study history at the same time keeping in mind that what is learned is valuable and reliable. Indiana in 1860 was in the homespun age. The typical farm home, a double log house or red brick, contained a loom, spinning wheel and reel; there were also the fireplace, the big, high beds, the trundle-bed, perhaps a fireplace in the kitchen fitted up with cranes, hooks and pans for cooking; in the spring house were the milk and butter, the apples, potatoes and turnips were in the

cellar or holed up in the ground (if it were winter). In the barn and barnyard were horses, oxen, cattle, hogs, sheep, geese, chickens of all breeds and appearances. A class of farm children could spend a month profitably studying the farm stock as described in the old Indiana Agricultural reports, comparing them with the stock on the farm at present. In the barn might be found a scythe, a cradle, a cycle, a breaking plow most probably with a wooden mould-board, a jumping shovel, hoes, hand rakes, a wagon and perhaps a carriage. In the fields, orchard and garden almost everything used for feed, food, or clothing will be growing. From the old ash hopper comes the lye for soapmaking and there sits the big 40 gallon iron kettle "for soap, sap or soup" as a writer of the times observes. There are the sheep from whose backs come the wool for clothing; there are the hogs to be butchered along near Christmastime and meat put up for the year; there in the smoke house is the box of dirt where the fire is made to smoke the hams and middlings hanging on hickory hooks fastened to the joists above; yonder is the grove where the sugar is made in early spring. When the flour and meal are all gone you might make an imaginary trip to the old water mill, meet dozens of farmers from all parts of the county, wait your turn till your grist is ground. About once a year, usually in the fall, all the marketable produce on the farm was loaded into the farm wagon and a trip was made to the nearest city to trade. Sometimes this trip consumed a week. All the fine things in the stores were seen and some of them bought—perhaps a cook-stove, an organ or a sewing machine. Still more important would be making a flat-boat, loading it, and running it down to New Orleans. The old fashioned home life of the fifties and sixties was rich in picturesque historical material. There was a whole round of social gatherings—the log rolling, quilting, singing school, spelling match, barbecue, debate, camp-meeting and literary.

In the city the change has been equally great. The city of the fifties had no street, no sewer, no police, no street lights, no street cars, but there were taverns, lyceums, theaters, churches, stores and some fine houses. Its life was not nearly so rich as that of the farm. To these might be added a visit

to the old district school, to the old fashioned court, to the legislature and other institutions of the time.

No attempt need be made here to complete the outline. From society in the fifties in Indiana one might pass to the old plantation south, to colonial New England, to Indian life, to hunters, trappers, to the soldiers of the Civil War, to the Mexican War, to the Revolution. These are the elements of history. Once a child has learned the meaning of these terms and how to picture them from the printed page it is ready to take up the systematic study of history. If the training has been successful there will be no need nor thought of memorizing words or dates in history any more than there is in mathematics or science. It is a question of understanding. Words fade away into the pictures they are intended for. The drudgery of history disappears but work, absorbing work, in plenty remains.